DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 049 RC 021 758

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TITLE	Current Literature on Small Schools. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-RC-98-8
PUB DATE	1999-01-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	RR93002012
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC/CRESS, P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325-1348; phone: 800-624-9120 (free).
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Benefits; Educational Change; *Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Literature Reviews; School Administration; *School Effectiveness; *School Size; *Small Schools; Student School Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

The small schools literature began with the large-scale quantitative studies of the late 1980s and early 1990s that firmly established small schools as more productive and effective than large ones. These studies confirmed various benefits of small schools--higher academic achievement, increased student satisfaction, and fewer dropouts and behavior problems--and discovered that small schools are particularly beneficial for disadvantaged students. Having built a strong quantitative case, the recent small-schools literature has focused on other areas. Work on policy issues associated with establishing and administering small schools has addressed optimum size, appropriate governance, equity concerns, relative costs of small and large schools, and teacher selection. Some recent studies have analyzed the essentials of small schools and the traits associated with success. Case studies of particular small schools and their successes and failures have been undertaken, and many confirm the findings of earlier large-scale quantitative research. Finally, small schools turn up increasingly in the school reform literature, and in some work, small size is considered essential to reform. (Contains 34 references.) (SV)

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EDO-RC-98-8 January 1999

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Current Literature on Small Schools

by Mary Anne Raywid

This Digest presents a brief overview of research literature on the effectiveness of small schools. It then describes current topics researchers have begun to explore, including discussion of associated policy issues, individual successes and failures, and essential elements and other implementation considerations. The Digest also overviews a substantial amount of school reform literature that interweaves smallness with other school proposals—sometimes simply presupposing it. In exploring and categorizing various reports, this summary is both broader and narrower than some other research Digests. First, because it attempts coverage of recent discussion of small schools, it cites contemporary news analysis as well as more formal research. Second, due to space limitations, it trades depth for breadth and does not undertake to weigh conflicting reports and conclusions nor to resolve questions still under dispute.

Overview of Recent Research on Effectiveness of Small Schools

The small schools literature began with the large-scale quantitative studies of the late 1980s and early 1990s that firmly established small schools as more productive and effective than large ones. These studies, involving large numbers of students, schools, and districts, confirmed that students learn more and better in small schools (Lee & Smith, 1995). Students make more rapid progress toward graduation (McMullan, Sipe, & Wolf, 1994). They are more satisfied with small schools, and fewer of them drop out than from larger schools (Pittman & Haughwout, 1987). Students behave better in smaller schools, which thus experience fewer instances of both minor and serious infractions (Stockard & Mayberry, 1992). All of this is particularly true for disadvantaged students, who perform far differently in small schools and appear more dependent upon them for success than do more fortunate youngsters (Lee & Smith, 1995).

All of these things we have confirmed with a clarity and at a level of confidence rare in the annals of education research. As one researcher summed it up, "a large body of research in the affective and social realms overwhelmingly affirms the superiority of small schools" (Cotton, 1996b). Another researcher noted that size exerts a "unique influence" on students' academic accomplishment, with a strong negative relationship linking the two: the larger the school, the lower the students' achievement levels (Howley,1994).

Such quantitative studies have built an impressive case for smallness. And a number of literature syntheses and reviews have now displayed the findings of such extensive studies and the advantages of small schools (e.g., Cotton, 1996a; Gladden, 1998). As these studies-of-studies show, it is rare indeed to find empirical support or justification for the large high school. Even those few studies citing positive benefits of large schools for some students (e.g., Friedkin & Necochea, 1988; Howley, 1995) find such benefits to be of far less magnitude than are the disadvantages of such schools for many others (Gladden, 1998).

New Directions in Small Schools Research

Having now built a strong quantitative case for the benefits of small schools, more recent literature has moved on to other things. One of the policy questions still being debated is, "How big is small?" The recent Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform set the limits at 350 students for elementary schools and 500 for high schools (Fine & Somerville, 1998). A 1990 study of school size research recommended up to 800 students for high schools (Williams, 1990). The National Association of Secondary School Principals recommended a limit of 600 for secondary schools (1996), yet two researchers who correlated size and test score performance came up with 600-900 as the size that works best (Lee & Smith, 1997). In general, those who emphasize the importance of the school as a community tend to set enrollment limits lower than do those who emphasize academic effectiveness, at least as measured by test scores.

Other policy issues discussed in the small schools literature include governance and costs. Small diversified schools and schools-within-schools require a different sort of accountability than that in a governance system designed to control and coordinate large uniform units (Hallett, 1995). Tensions appear both at the system level with middle management (Darling-Hammond, Ancess, McGregor, & Zuckerman, 1995; Meier, 1998) and at the school level with building administrators (Hendrie, 1998a; Hendrie, 1998b; Raywid, 1996a). Realizing the promise small schools offer requires more than controlling the size, it is also a matter of adopting a focus for the school (Gladden, 1998) and of restructuring practices and arrangements in the school and at the system level (Hallett, 1995; Lee, Smith & Croninger, 1997).

Another policy issue pertains to equity, both among schools and among students. This involves considering whether the small schools enjoy advantages others do not—more selectivity, more motivated students, more cooperative families, more and better resources. A recent study of New York's famed District 4 credited the small schools there with having raised achievement levels throughout, not just in the small schools. Thus, the researchers concluded, critics' fears of creating a system of haves and have nots had not been realized (Teske, Schneider, Marschall, & Roch, 1997). A study of neighboring District 3 found that its small diversified middle schools were drawing students from across neighborhoods and decreasing the number of racially isolated schools within the district (Raywid & Kottkamp, 1996).

The issue of relative costs is receiving attention, and a first cost-benefit analysis of New York's small schools found them to be a good value, with "the quite small additional budgets . . . well worth the improved outputs." (Stiefel, Latarola, Fruchter, & Berne, 1998, p. 18). When viewed on a cost-per-student-enrolled basis, they are somewhat more expensive. But when examined on the basis of the number of students they graduate, they are *less* expensive than either medium-sized or large high schools. (These findings hold true for the small academic and alternative schools, but not for the more costly "last chance" alternatives or vocational schools.)

Other policy questions surfacing in the literature, as well as in public discourse, include the role of unions in relation to small schools and their needs (e.g., whether teacher selection is to be by colleagues instead of by seniority). And we are seeing demands that small schools research findings be honored in political decisions (Carnes, 1996).

Analyses (e.g., Ancess, 1998; Anderson, 1998; Fine & Somerville, 1998; Raywid, 1994, 1996a) are beginning to appear of the essential elements of small schools and the traits associated with success. Lists differ, though common themes are clearly discernible. Advocates of Chicago's Small Schools list self-selection of the faculty, some degree of autonomy, a cohesive pedagogical approach, and an inclusive admissions policy (Anderson, 1998). The Cross City Campaign for Ur-

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han School Reform urges small schools to have a full curriculum, a cohesive learning environment, a staff selected at the site, a culture supportive of teachers, accountability focused on student achievement, control over educational and budgetary decisions, and a nontracked program equipping all students for the option of college or work (Fine & Somerville, 1998). There is also advice on planning and launching a new small school (Ancess, 1998; Raywid, 1996b).

A number of case studies of particular small schools have been undertaken; many bear out the large-scale quantitative studies cited earlier. Other in-depth studies of individual small schools are being published to display specific features and attributes. For instance, a work on authentic assessment contains studies of four of New York's small schools—Central Park East Secondary School, International High School, P.S. 261, and the Bronx New School—and of Wilmington, Delaware's Hodgson Vocational Technical High School (Darling-Hammond, Ancess & Falk, 1995). A work on neoinstitutional theory includes a detailed study of an unsuccessful school-within-a-school effort as an illustrative case (Raywid, 1996b).

Small schools increasingly turn up in school reform literature, such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals' *Breaking Ranks: Changing An American Institution* (1996), which makes smallness an essential element. The Carnegie Corporation of New York's *Turning Points* also recommends "small communities for learning" (1989, p. 9). And Tom Sergiovanni, who has argued that schools must change their self-image and governing metaphor from organization to community, makes size a pivotal condition (1996). Similarly, much of the discussion of themed schools and focus schools presumes a small school, as does much of the literature on teacher empowerment (see, e.g., Raywid, 1994).

Many find instructional reform of virtually any sort to be contingent upon small school size (e.g., Vulliamy & Webb, 1995; Roellke, 1996). In some cities, small schools have also come to be associated with a powerful form of accountability, as large failing schools are phased out and replaced by several separate and independent small schools. As this sampling attests, smallness has been interwoven with many of today's reform themes, and with other features and conditions currently recommended for schools. Interest in and examination of small schools appear to be thriving.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002012. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI, the Department, or AEL.

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